

THE CALIFORNIA MAGAZINE

PSA
May 1976

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Interview:

Werner Erhard

"What is, is. And what ain't, ain't."

by John Johns

Sixteen years ago there was no Werner Erhard. Five years ago there was no *est*. Today Werner Erhard and *est* (Erhard Seminars Training) are truly an American phenomenon, a thriving success in the fertile garden of modern pop psychology.

Werner Hans Erhard was born Jack Rosenberg 40 years ago in Philadelphia. He married his high school sweetheart and, in true story-book fashion, proceeded to raise a family of four children. But in 1960 the story took an abrupt turn—Jack Rosenberg ran away with Ellen, who is now his second wife. With characteristic candor, Werner admits that he took off "to avoid the responsibilities I had." (He has since become very close to his first family, while also raising three children in his second marriage.)

It was in St. Louis that Jack Rosenberg became Werner Erhard, borrowing from Werner Heisenberg, Nobel Prize winning physicist, and former West German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard. From St. Louis, Erhard made his way to California, where he worked for a correspondence school. Not long afterward he went to Spokane and a job managing a sales office for Britannica's Great Books series.

In 1963 Werner took a job with the Parents Cultural Institute, a subsidiary of *Parents Magazine*, which published and sold encyclopedias. Within three years he had become vice-president, having excelled as a sales manager. He remained there for six years.

Werner's next position was with the Grolier Society, Inc. Their business was also encyclopedias, and again Werner demonstrated remarkable organizational and motivational skills in sales.

While he was sharpening his management skills, however, Erhard also embarked on a spiritual quest that took him through Zen, yoga, Scientology, Mind Dy-



namics, Gestalt and numerous psychic layovers along the way. Then, driving the freeway one day, Werner Erhard "got it"—the experience that transformed his life and led him to the formation of *est* (also Latin for "it is"). His message: "What is, is. And what ain't, ain't."

In the 4½ years that the San Francisco-based *est* has flourished, it has doubled in size each year. A paid staff of 230 and a rotating volunteer corps of 6000 to 7000 *est* graduates currently power *est* offices in 12 cities. There are now more than 70,000 mostly middle-class graduates (this is no fringe hippie movement) who pay \$250 to "get it" from the demanding 60-hour, two-weekend course. Last year revenues were more than \$9 million, and 12,000 people are on the waiting list, anxious to swell the ranks of enthusiastic *est* graduates.

Werner himself disclaims any ambitions to become a millionaire. His salary is reported to be \$48,000 a year and he lives in a \$100,000 house in Marin, pilots a rented Cessna and drives a Mercedes that sports license plates reading SO WUT. Looking to the future, Werner Erhard nourishes the hope that 40 million Amer-

icans will someday have taken the *est* training.

Q: Werner, what brings people to *est*? Considering the relative affluence of *est* graduates, could it be a dissatisfaction with material success?

A: I don't think it's a dissatisfaction with personal success or material success that brings people to *est*. In many respects, having achieved that allows you to take a look at what your life is really about. Material success isn't all that bad a thing; however, it's only what people thought they wanted. When they have it, they often realize it's not what they thought it would be, and doesn't in itself bring them satisfaction. I think it's the recognition that there's something beyond personal and material success that brings people to *est*.

Q: Do you feel that part of the attraction is the American preoccupation with instant gratification? In this case, overnight enlightenment?

A: There are some elements of that. However, there is a piece of information which strongly belies that notion, and that is, that among *est* graduates there is a large body of what are ordinarily called "seekers"—people who have spent their whole lives seeking for "it," usually doing that the hard way. But there's no such thing as long-term enlightenment. You can't take a long time to get enlightened. What takes a long time is trying to get enlightened, and as anybody who's studied enlightenment knows, one of the things that will keep you from getting enlightened is trying to get enlightened. The only thing there is is instant enlightenment. It happens out of time, so it is really instantaneous.

Q: You say that people are dissatisfied because they think they have what they want but find that they're not really experiencing it. What are the barriers to their experiencing it? ♦

Interview:

A: The simplified answer is that people seem to exist in three parts. We have the outer part, which is the thing we put together to survive in life—our persona, our ego. This best-foot-forward face. Underneath that we're trying to hide, particularly from ourselves, the person we're afraid we might be: small-thinking, frightened, concerned about our own survival, pretending, arrogant. So we put on the face, and underneath that is the thing we're afraid we might be. Some of us put on the face so successfully that we don't even know this person we're afraid we are. Underneath that is the self. So the barrier to the experience of who we actually are is the unwillingness to confront who we are afraid we are, or dramatizing who we are afraid we are. You see, some people are acting out their fear of who they might be. That is the simple answer.

Q: So people come to *est* hiding behind their persona, wearing their "face." Yet so many *est* graduates come away excited about a change or transformation. How could you characterize this?

A: Let me try to back around to it. The transformation is the shift of the principle which orients the person's life, which is

ordinarily the principle of gaining satisfaction. Essentially what organizes life for most of us is an attempt to gratify our needs: our psychological needs, our material needs, our personal needs. Some people bring that to a very high level, for instance, charitable and good citizens. But it's a behavior to fill a high-level need. If you look at Maslow's hierarchy, the ultimate need is the need for symmetry and beauty, and people who are behaving to fulfill a need for symmetry and beauty don't look very driven, because they're really not very driven. They're at the peak of this hierarchy of needs. That, however, is not a transformed individual. Individuals transform when there's a shift in the principle which orients their life from one of gaining satisfaction to one of expressing the satisfaction they've already got. What distinguishes a human being is becoming. What distinguishes an enlightened human being is being. The difference between an enlightened or transformed being and an unenlightened or not-yet-aware-of-themselves being is that one is becoming something and expressing himself in the striving to become that and the other one *is* something, and is

expressing that in moving through the world.

Q: In other words, people come out of *est* not "trying"?

A: Yes. Now, just let me mitigate that a little bit, because I spoke to you in absolutes to make a sharp contrast. I should have used words like "ordinarily you and I are expressing becoming." What happens in the training is that the predominant way you are is "being" rather than "becoming." All of us have experiences of being. I'm sure that you can recall experiences of being, and you know that the quality of life has somehow shifted. Whether they're frequent or infrequent, everyone's had those experiences of being, and they can get in touch with that and know what we're talking about.

Q: Let's look at the training, then. Can you illuminate somewhat how this transformation is accomplished?

A: Sure. The first day, or at least the first half of the first day of the training, is spent explaining the training in detail, so people know exactly what's going to happen. They find out what they're likely to bump up against. This is so they can take responsibility for being in the training. The train-

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ing cannot occur when it's being "done" to somebody. We also, on the first day, present facts that are inconsistent with the way people believe the world to be—and I emphasize the word believe. The second day, you have a very direct experience of this thing we spoke about before: you really haven't been experiencing life, you have been *conceptualizing* it. The shift here is from having your life as a story of what's happening to having your life as the experience of what's happening. The second half of the second day is what we call the danger process, and in that process you actually get to experience—not think about, not figure out, not have somebody tell you—but experience what is really making you hold onto your act, or face.

The third day is spent in discovering what is actually real for you, as contrasted with what you always thought was real and what appears to be real, and you discover the actual nature of reality. You also discover those false notions you're holding in your ground of being, those things which are so *so* for you that you never think them. They're what you think with, and what you see with. You discover you can create your own experience.

The last day you have a direct experience of your own mind, which is akin to seeing the back of your eyeballs with your eyeballs. You turn yourself inside out, and you come face to face with your own mind—and it happens to be who you always thought you were. But if you are looking at who you always thought you were, you've got to be the person looking. That's where most people "get it," although some people get it in the first hour and some people get it three days later. Then you look at the true nature of problems. You look at the way relationships are actually set up and why they become so muddled and confused, and why they're often unsatisfying.

Q: Is the training complete when a person graduates?

A: Yes. It's a complete beginning. In other words . . .

Q: Not an end?

A: Precisely! The training ends nothing. What it really does is start something—and it starts it completely.

Q: Why do you suggest that someone who's not "winning" in psychotherapy not enroll in *est*?

A: Because, obviously, they've got a prob-

lem that ought to be handled by psychotherapists. That's an important thing. We handle that very specifically by telling people who need psychotherapy or medical attention that *est* is not the place to go, that *est* is not psychotherapy. If you need therapy, you should go to a therapist. If you need doctoring, go to an M.D.

Q: You personally have reached an unusual place, especially as the source of a dynamic organization like *est*. Where is your ego in all this?

A: I think the best thing to tell you is after I had this experience, I worked for many months before I actually started *est*. I worked hard, really hard, to try to get my ego out of the way. I knew that I couldn't create the space for other people to participate as long as my ego was in the way. It was after I solved that problem that I started *est*. The way I solved the problem was by realizing, "How dare you not have an ego! How dare you! That's the ultimate ego!" The ultimate position of ego is to try not to have an ego. So, where my ego is, is right here, and I handle it by taking responsibility for it rather than by being the effect of it. Instead of being my ego, I have an ego. •

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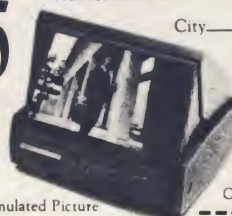
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